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Haig Perceives Inside Campaign To Discredit Him

The column that was scheduled to appear today in this space reached the White House in advance and stimulated some urgent telephone calls from President Reagan and Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. The story behind the column is more intriguing, therefore, than the original report.

I had written that Haig was top man on the president's "disappointment list" and that he "reportedly has one foot on a banana peel." I had cited incidents that allegedly had caused the president to lose confidence in Haig's judgment.

Haig was so disturbed over the column that he called twice to discuss it. He said it was obviously the handiwork of a top White House aide, who has been running a guerrilla campaign against him for nine months.

The campaign to discredit him, said Haig, also involved persons high in the CIA and the Senate. "This damages my ability to carry out the president's foreign policy," he said, calling it "sabotage of the president" by some of his own people. "It is just mind-boggling," said Haig.

Later, the president telephoned to

say the column was wrong. "I am very pleased with Al Haig and what he has done," Reagan assured me. "All that I have heard is that he has the confidence of leaders around the world. We haven't had a secretary who was so well thought of in years."

The president said he'd like to know "who is saying these things" against Haig, but acknowledged amiably, "I guess I am asking the impossible." Yes, the identity of sources is one thing a reporter can't tell even the president.

Reagan reviewed with me the incidents I had reported in the column. I had cited, for example, Haig's handling of Menachem Begin during the Israeli leader's recent U.S. visit.

According to my sources, Haig had favored placating Begin and had promised that the Israeli leader, in return, would not lobby against the U.S. sale of Airborne Warning and Control System radar planes to Saudi Arabia. Begin, nevertheless, had spoken out against the sale.

Reagan said the promise not to lobby came from Begin himself, not second-hand from Haig. "Menachem told me he would not lobby against the AWACS sale," said Reagan.

"I got upset," he admitted, "when I got reports from the Hill that Begin had spoken against the AWACS sale. But Menachem said, no, he had just answered questions but had not gone out of his way to deliberately lobby. I accepted that and believed it."

After the Senate approved the AWACS deal, added Reagan, "the Israeli reaction was the minimum they had to say. I am not so unhappy about it that it bothers me."

I had also reported in the column that the president was upset over Haig's "backdoor involvement" in helping to arrange for former president Nixon's recent Middle East tour.

Reagan said no one had gone behind his back, but that Nixon had advised him about the tour in advance. "Dick told me that he was going on to Saudi Arabia," said the president. "These were people he had known as president. I had no objections."

But there was one thing the president wanted to emphasize: Haig speaks for him on foreign affairs.